

Childhood Sexual Abuse: The Truth behind the Trauma

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Sitting in a jury box listening to two young children discuss their sexual assault, endangerment, and behavioral issues is an incredibly heart-wrenching and challenging task. To listen to them be cross-examined by a defense attorney is even harder. Yet it happens every day in America. Every 11 minutes, Child Protective Services (CPS) substantiates, or finds evidence for, a claim of child sexual abuse.¹ The financial, emotional, and societal toll of child sexual assault on everyday life will never be truly calculated, but we know they have lasting impacts. It is important that parents, guardians, and communities understand who is perpetrating the majority of child sexual assaults, how children and adolescent behavior is shaped by their assaults, and what policies are in place to protect against assault and bring perpetrators to justice.

Hurdles and Victories

According to data from 2016,² 93% of childhood victims of assault know their perpetrator well, with 80% of those cases involving a parent, and 15% involving a close relative or unmarried partner to a parent. Statistics on substantiated crimes only tell us a small portion of the story. Many child sexual abuse victims never come forward to state their case. Being abused as a child often instills a sense of abandonment, self-hate, confusion, and guilt, which makes coming forward to discuss the assault impossible for many. Statutes of limitation on how long a victim has to report a crime also result in many undocumented and uninvestigated crimes. Children often experience changes in behavior, mood, and awareness after abuse has taken place. When questioned about the alleged abuse, children are often unable to recall specific details related to the event, such as time, place, and sequence of events. Improved understanding of Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome (CSAAS), the new Child Victims Act (2019), and the anticipated signing of Erin's Law finally allow children (or adults) and their support systems to come forward and seek the justice they deserve.

Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome (CSAAS)

CSAAS was first introduced in 1983 by Dr. Roland Summit as a way to improve understanding of coping behaviors of child victims of sexual abuse. The syndrome is composed of five categories, two of which define basic childhood vulnerability and three that are contingent on sexual assault: 1) secrecy, 2) helplessness, 3) entrapment and accommodation, 4) delayed, unconvincing disclosure, and 5) retraction.³

Secrecy

Perpetrators use many methods to scare or intimidate children into keeping assault a secret. One method is to convince the child that no one will believe the child if they tell someone what was happening, or that they, or someone they love would be in danger by doing so. Because children are impressionable, and their sense of right and wrong is normalized by what adults do and say, the perpetrator is able to convince a child of false protection. Due to this imbalance of power and perception, children are less likely to seek help.

Helplessness

Children ages 7-13 hold the greatest vulnerability of being sexually abused and more than 20% of children are sexually abused before the age of 8.⁴ At a very young age, children are taught to obey, respect, and show affection toward adults entrusted with their care. Think about how often parents demand that their children hug a relative. Children feel powerless to say “no” to a parental figure. Children also have difficulty comprehending the consequences (or lack thereof) of inappropriate sexual behavior by family members. They are taught that strangers are the enemy and the immediate risk to their safety. The fact that such a high percentage of child sexual assault is perpetrated in the home by a family member only further increases the imbalance of power and feelings of helplessness a child faces. Nothing is scarier to a child than the threat of the loss of love, security, or family.⁵ As Roland Summit states in his research “Men who seek children as sexual partners discover quickly something that remains incredible to less impulsive adults; dependent children are helpless to resist or to complain.”

Entrapment and Accommodation

Sexual abuse is typically a repeat occurrence for a child within a dependent relationship. If the child does not receive any type of intervention near the time the first assault occurs, the child has very few options to stop future attacks. In an effort to survive and keep the family together, the child learns to accommodate the continuation of sexual assault. Accommodating the abuse usually leads to its escalation, meaning the child then faces increased feelings of guilt, rage, betrayal, self-hate, and unhealthy coping mechanisms. These accommodating behaviors show up in many ways and are sometimes a way for a child to feel a sense of power and control. These include feelings of torment and persecution, splitting of reality, altered consciousness, hysteria, delinquency, sociopathy, rage, substance abuse, and self-mutilation. These behaviors are often viewed by parents and professionals as representations of a “bad kid”, and therefore, one who should not be trusted.

Delayed, Conflicted, and Unconvincing Disclosure

The majority of child sexual assault cases are never reported, investigated, or tried in court. Many children never disclose the acts to a parent, guardian, or other trust individual, and if they do, it is because something has triggered them to disclose. By the time a child discloses their abuse, signs of behavioral accommodation have already begun, and the child is either seen as troubled, or high achieving. These behaviors make it difficult for an unsuspecting partner or guardian to believe the allegations of abuse. Unless specifically trained in child sexual abuse, most adults do not believe that a child would wait that long to disclose assault and that a troubled child is simply telling lies to get away with something. When confronted with the allegations of abuse, the perpetrator is likely to vehemently deny any actions and place full blame on the child. These immediate responses of disbelief, questioning, and rejection can lead the child to feel further rejected and therefore change their story to mask their pain. Many children who experience acute, relapsing trauma experience disassociation. Disassociation is characterized by problems with memory, identity, emotion, perception, behavior and sense of self. During disclosure, the child may be unable to give a consistent sequence of events, places, times, and participants.⁶ Disassociation leads untrained adults to believe that the child must be lying about the abuse and often results in a lack of further investigation or prosecution.

Retraction

Coming forward with a claim of sexual assault can feel like re-victimization. The questioning by family members, law enforcement, social workers, and clinicians reinforces the child’s fear of losing security, family, and self-worth. As a result, victims sometimes retract their claim to preserve their family.

Child Victims Act, 2019

The Child Victims Act was passed in New York State on February 14, 2019, expanding an individual's right to come forward with reports of childhood abuse. Under previous laws, child sexual abuse offenses could be prosecuted up to five years from their occurrence. Civil lawsuits had a statute of limitations of three years from the victim's 18th birthday. The 2019 law allows victims of these crimes to begin a civil lawsuit at any time before they reach 55 years of age. The law provides victims whose claims have been time-barred a new opportunity for their day in court by opening a one-year window for them to begin their action. The law also eliminates the need to file a notice of claim for sexual offenses committed against a minor, requires judicial training with respect to crimes involving the sexual abuse of minors, and authorizes the Office of Court Administration to disseminate rules and regulations for the timely judgement of revived claims of assault.⁷

We Must Continue to Advocate and Educate

Statistics reflecting perpetrator relationships to the abused are in direct conflict with who the majority of parents/ guardians believe are committing these crimes. "Stranger danger" is not the greatest threat to children's safety. Unfortunately, media coverage of child sexual assault reinforces the fallacies of stranger danger. Research shows that most news stories on child sexual assault reflect perpetrators as strangers, mentally ill, and of low socioeconomic status.⁸ This coverage results in a skewed understanding of the actual threat of assault. Children are far more likely to be victimized by someone they know than by a stranger, and our news media should better reflect this reality.

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There are thousands of organizations across the country working to educate the public about child sexual assault, but more needs to be done. Youth programming should be further developed to allow children to understand what to do if they are being touched inappropriately, are witnessing violence or other acts that are inappropriate, or feel endangered by an individual with whom they interact. They should be taught that they might experience a wide range of emotions, including pleasure, guilt, and shame. They should be provided with information about who they can talk to about these feelings. Children need to feel empowered to be their own advocates.

Parents also need more education to understand Child Abuse Accommodation Syndrome and to encourage open dialogue with their children concerning their interactions with other adults. Acceptance and validation of a child's claim of sexual assault is critical to their psychological survival. A parent or guardian who is able to advocate and protect a child victimized by sexual assault is empowering and provides an opportunity for that child to one day heal and move forward.

Luckily, steps are being taken to implement this type of education and awareness programming in New York State. Erin's Law, which has already been passed in 35 states across the country, has been placed on Governor Cuomo's desk for signing. Erin's Law requires that all public schools in each state implement a prevention-orientated child sexual abuse program which teaches 1) students in grades K-8 age-appropriate techniques to recognize child sexual abuse and tell a trusted adult, 2) school personnel all about child sexual abuse and 3) parent and guardians the warning signs of child sexual abuse, plus needed assistance, referral or resource information to support sexually abused children and their families.⁹

Endnotes

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